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FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jade Dozier

August 2018

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO

by

Jade Dozier

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM AND MASS  
COMMUNICATIONS

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2018

Richard Craig, Ph.D.

Department of Journalism and  
Mass Communications

Bob Rucker, M.S.

Department of Journalism and  
Mass Communications

Jennifer Rycenga, Ph.D.

Department of Religious  
Studies

ABSTRACT

FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO

by Jade Dozier

The relationship between the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning) community and the church has been studied for critical reasons. The connection between the two has been uneasy because of the religious beliefs from religious groups and the many misunderstandings of what the LGBTQ community believes in. I have been able to understand the poor relationship between the Black church and homosexuality from the sources that are examined in my Literature Review. I evaluated the similarities and differences between queer men and women based on upbringing, denomination, and familial acceptance. As a LA native, I narrowed research on Black religion in LA County such as Baptist and Church of God in Christ (COGIC). These denominations are closely related to the participants. There are four affirming Black denominations in Los Angeles, as well as predominantly Black affirming churches in the city that will be examined. I chose to highlight the personal experiences of ten queer Black people and their relationship with the Black Church. I formed a discussion on the reality of coming out to love ones and included studies on non-affirming church spaces. A major discovery came from understanding what spiritual stability meant for each participant. I then shared the limitations from the thesis and ways to enhance the overall study.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AWAB- Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptist

COGIC- Church of God in Christ

DOMA- Defense of Marriage Act

LGBTQ- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer

MCC- Metropolitan Community Church

ONA- Opening and Affirming

UPPC- United Progressive Pentecostal Church



## **Introduction**

The relationship between the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning) community and religious groups has been problematic for decades. This issue is the result of Christian groups using sources like the Bible to condemn gays, reporting that their souls would burn in hell for loving the same sex. One infamous example would be the Westboro Baptist Church known nationally for protesting against the LGBTQ community with slogans such as “God hates Gays.” I want to do this thesis focusing on the experiences of queer Black Christians in the Black church, meaning African American denominations.

It is no secret that holding the “sex talk” and discussing one’s attraction is difficult for many parents of color because of how uncomfortable it can be. Some parents may neglect it all together or wait considerable amounts of time before discussing such a key and intimate subject with their child. However, within the Black community, conversations about sex and sexuality can be even more shameful and condemning. The difficulty of discussing sexuality within the Black community stretches back to slavery.

Enslaved women were forced to have sex with slave owners, but their masters considered this a favor. White men often claimed they were doing Black women a favor because they believed they were saving them from having sex with Black men who were considered animalistic and brutal. Since then, sex has been a harsh topic for Blacks to grasp and communicate; this paves the way for Christian groups to use the Bible as a way to make their words and opinions resemble God’s.

Labeling same-sex attraction as a sin is a key factor in the separation of LGBTQ people and Christians. Religion has been a source of both solace and suffering for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer Americans. While there are groups of LGBTQ Americans that have been raised in an organized religion and continue to cherish their faith community, too many have been forced to leave those communities behind because of condemnation of LGBTQ individuals. But within Black churches, LGBTQ people often go silent. Their faithful peers might know they are LGBTQ but their identities are rarely acknowledged outright. Others simply find "church" or worship in other ways, like watching services on TV, listening to them on the radio, or by having conversations about faith at coffee shops.

My main goal was to interview African American queer Christians about their coming-out experiences and evaluate how their relationship with God has developed. In addition, scholarly sources providing more insight on same-sex relationships, culture, and religion. I also explain the poor relationship between the Black church and homosexuality from the sources examined in the Literature Review.

## **Literature Review**

### **Abstract**

The relationship between the LGBTQ community and the church has been studied for critical reasons. The connection between the two has been uneasy because of the religious beliefs of religious groups and the many misunderstandings of what the LGBTQ community believes in. There are churches that accept all people but not many Black denominations that do so. Churches should be open to all people seeking a relationship with God without being persecuted for the people they love. But the church can also be hypocritical in terms of acknowledging what God views as a sin.

The theory used for deeper comprehension of the relationship between queer Black Christians and the church is the Spiral of Silence Theory. This theory relates to queer Black Christians and their religious community in terms of fear of isolation when the group or public realizes that these individual have a divergent opinion from the status quo, heterosexual identities. My study taps into the reactions of queer Christians and how sin is preached and handled by heterosexual Christians and pastors, while narrowing the focus on Los Angeles County.

For this research, I searched for strong sources that would highlight many aspects of the relationship that queer, Black individuals have with Black Christianity. I was able to find important sources which highlight three subtopics of experiences that gay Christians have in terms of religion, community, and reconciliation. The first topic centers on the Bible and same-sex behaviors as interpreted in scripture. The second topic scans civil and Christian marriages. The third topic examines Black history and culture of

homosexuality. The fourth topic focuses on the history of the LGBT Christian movement. The final topic addresses how creating safe spaces in church has become crucial for queer Christians.

### **Background Research**

Black LGBTQ individuals are said to be the most understudied group, so people are often misunderstanding the core values of this group (Green, 2014). As a lesbian Christian, I often heard hurtful comments pertaining to my identity such as homosexuality is a sin, a sickness, and can be changed. These comments sting even more coming from the man who baptized me when I was seven. My Black Baptist church is the reason I wanted to focus on Los Angeles County, the city I was born and the church that taught me to despise myself.

*Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church* is a documentary about Black LGBT people who are struggling with the intersections of sexuality, faith and race. The stories in the documentary are varied, passionate and inspiring. “Clay Cane, who created and produced the film, traveled to Atlanta, where church and LGBT culture cross paths like nowhere else, to dive into one of the most taboo topics in the Black community” (IMDb). Cane, along with BET.com, zooms in on the lives of specific people who are facing struggles because of their conflicting identities.

“The linkage between marriage rights and full citizenship explains the severity with which whites policed the ban on interracial marriage and the parallel severity of critics of same-sex marriage today, who do not want gays and lesbians to be accepted as equals” (Rycenga, 2009, p.7). There are three primary stances on homosexuality with inspect to

religion: 1) rejectionism, 2) love the sinner, hate the sin, and 3) full acceptance.

Rejectionism is when a person or people are unwilling to accept the lifestyles of LGBTQ people. This involves refusing to tolerate to the point of protest, strong explicit dislike, and dismissal from a congregation. The stance “love the sinner, hate the sin” is derived from the thought of religious members that will open church doors to queer people but are strongly against same-sex relationships altogether. Love the sinner, hate the sin and rejectionism are adopted by non-affirming Christians who do not believe in same-sex marriage. Full acceptance typifies people (either religious or not) who understand same-sex attraction without judgment. They have the ability to become allies and are important for the LGBTQ community. There is a possibility for Black Christians to disagree with homophobic thoughts and ideas, but they are often quiet about their stance in the great debate.

Religious walls are likely to be created by non-affirming Christians as they are likely to cut off any form of communication because of uncomfortable feelings about homosexuality. Because of this, it is more likely for LGBTQ Christians to leave faith organizations rather than staying. “For Christians, the problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scriptural passages that condemn it, but how to reconcile the rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Christ” (Rycenga, p. 4).

### **Same-Sex Behavior in the Bible**

Religion infuses every dimension of African American life. These ideas correlate with the black church’s preaching that gay men resemble the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the bible (Griffin, p. 44). In Black churches, men often lead the opposition

to homosexuality. This is because Black men are more likely to become the pastor before women. “Scripture became a core value for blacks during slavery and through both white and black preaching, African Americans quickly became Bible Christians” (p. 51). There are scriptures that are often referenced in condemning homosexuality. From the Old Testament, I will highlight Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. From the New Testament, I will highlight Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9.

In the Old Testament, regulation of sexuality is discussed early as a law to be followed. Leviticus is the third book written by Moses, the prophet that freed many slaves and was instructed by God directly. This portion of the Bible focuses on avoiding sin and impurity in regards to sexual laws. The King James Version of Leviticus 18:22 says “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.” This verse has been interpreted to mean that a man should not have sexual intercourse with another man, with the assumption that sexual acts are only meant for a man and a woman. Leviticus 20:13 says “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.” The second verse differs from the first in how there is a punishment upon both parties to the act (Walsh, 2001, p. 202).

Romans 1:26-27 was written by Paul as a description of unnatural sexual activities (Miller, 1995, p. 1). It reads, “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in

themselves that recompence of their error which was meet” (King James Version). When Romans 1:26-27 is read by modern western readers, the category of homosexuality is invoked and thus verse 26 is assumed to be a reference to female homosexuality (p. 1). Works which specialize in homosexuality in the Bible and the church show little or no critical analysis of Romans 1:26. “There is an assumption that Paul and his audience had a single category of homosexual, which was subdivided into male and female forms” (p. 2). It is also significant that most of the present dialogue in the church on homosexuality is being conducted by males who may not have an abiding interest in issues dealing with female homosexuality (p. 3).

In 1 Corinthians 6:9, also written by Paul, it states “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind” (King James Version). Paul was not against homosexuality, but against homosexual abuse, or perhaps homosexual sins related to abuse of the body and comparable to heterosexual sins such as adultery and fornication (Malick, p. 1). “Homosexuality is expressed as another example of an improper sexual relationship outside a monogamous heterosexual union and Paul’s descriptions are of excessive practices, and that homosexuality is a biblically approved expression of sexuality” (p. 2).

Pastors in Black denominations are generally silent when it comes to same-sex marriage or affirming queer Christians (Griffin, p. 18). “Black Christians have also demonstrated the possibility to be faithful Christians without accepting all scripture as authoritative, first through the rejection of slavery in scripture” (p. 53). This causes many

black Christians to be in the middle of what has become a moral dilemma and some have to choose whether they see it as a sin or not (p. 62). “Black attitudes also have a symbolic importance for the gay rights struggle and LGBTQ activists draw heavily from the strategic analogies of the civil rights movement” (Lewis, p. 61). When the queer community compares themselves to the black community, it brings frustration because they don’t know what suffering is, as if their rights and lives are being valued by all.

### **Christian and Civil Marriage**

There has been a need to shift the definition of marriage for many reasons. “Marriage has been known to involve a man and a woman because that is the definitional essence of marriage” (Eskridge, 1993, p. 1421). In the twentieth century, the public framework of marriage would be preeminently economic, preserving the husband’s role as primary provider and the wife as his dependent, despite the growing presence of women in the labor force (Estin, 2002, p. 1696). The irony is that black heterosexuals are leading the charge of denying marriage to another oppressed group, black gays and lesbians (Griffin, p. 86). “Gay legal theorists and feminists have argued that by prohibiting same-sex marriage, states engage in sex discrimination, thereby violating the federal Equal Protection Clause and state equal rights amendments” (Eskridge, p. 1425).

But before same-sex marriage was legalized, many same-sex couples considered themselves married for all intents and purposes, and rabbis, priests, and ministers have married literally thousands of these couples in religious services (p. 1483). “As gay and lesbian couples have come to form more lasting relationships, gay law has insisted that the state not only tolerate same-sex unions, but recognize them as marriages” (Eskridge,



p. 1484). The shift in what marriage looks like is prevalent for same-sex couples denying to follow gender roles, and instead focus on making the reality of marriage fit their own ways of living. “A marriage between two men or two women necessarily takes place within a framework that does not include centuries of gender-role expectations and oppression” (Feldblum, p. 173).

Civil marriages became the secularized route for same-sex couples as a marriage honored as a civil contract without a religious ceremony. There was a demand to be seen as an equal. In 1990 *Baker v. State of Vermont* the court, applying the “common benefits clause” of the state constitution, found that same-sex couples should receive the same benefits as opposite-sex couples and ordered the state legislature to ensure that they did (Brandzel, 2005, p. 186). Twenty-one years ago, Congress passed and President Clinton signed into law the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). DOMA had two provisions: it defined marriage for federal purposes as “only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word ‘spouse’ refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife”; and second, it permitted states not to recognize same-sex marriages performed in or legitimized by other states (Brandzel, p. 180). In 2003, *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health* was a case clearing the way for Massachusetts to become the first state to marry same-sex couples was carefully prepared and vetted by these lawyers (Egan & Sherrill, p. 229). Half of respondents agreed that civil unions for same-sex couples are essentially the same as civil marriage or a marriage license for heterosexual couples. “Through legislation that criminalizes sexualities located outside the purview of the heterosexual, monogamous family, the state has

constructed heterosexuality as a prerequisite to citizenship and as the unspoken norm of membership and national belonging” (Brandzel, p. 172).

By casting themselves as the only true heirs of civil rights protections, many straight black heterosexual ministers haven’t drawn a wedge in the argument that the petitions of lesbians and gays are also civil rights (Griffin, p. 86). “In striking contrast to the African-American civil rights movement, where legal action was often carefully coordinated with political strategy, the battle over gay marriage initially caught gay leaders by surprise” (Egan & Sherrill, p. 229). Civil unions are viewed as contradictory in that they signal at least a partial recognition of same-sex relationships while they label gay and lesbian couples second-class citizens (Brandzel, pp. 186-187). “According to gay rights advocates, marriage rights will allow GLBT people to be recognized as viable members of the nation and will signal one of the final moves toward full equality” (p. 187).

Partners in all types of relationships can be understood to create a unique context for their relationship through establishing a system of rules, expectations, and behavior within the relationship (Lannutti, 2005, p. 6). “Civil marriage privileges long-term sexual partners by affording them exclusive access to a broad array of tangible and intangible benefits” (Knouse, 2011, p. 364). The importance of longevity is evident from the fact that civil marriage has traditionally been understood as a lifelong commitment.

### **Homosexuality: History and Culture of Black People**

History will record the failure of black heterosexuals as a group to be in solidarity with lesbians and gays (Griffin, 2000, p. 20). Coming out refers to informing others about one’s sexual identity. When queer individuals come out, they are seeking

affirmative support for the natural evolution of his or her identity (Haldeman, 1991, p. 153). Being queer and religious involves two conflicting identities, in terms of how the two communities view same-sex attraction. “Queer Black individuals have reported significantly more negative attitudes toward homosexuality and are less likely to disclose their sexual identity than other races and are more likely than queer Whites to think their friends will disapprove homosexuality” (Rosario et.al., 2004, p. 217). Reports show that blacks come out at younger ages than other racial groups. They are also less likely to feel comfortable about others knowing their sexual identity because the Black community is more likely to view homosexuality as always wrong (Lewis, 2003, p. 73).

As a result, queer Blacks face greater difficulty in finding alternative sources of acceptance and support; it is likely for them to find community from people of other races and religious denominations. But the fact is that attitudes towards gay people are psychologically similar to majority attitudes towards racial, ethnic, and other minority groups (Herek, 2000, p. 2). It is also noted that “many heterosexual individuals have had engaged in homosexual behavior and experienced same-sex attractions, just as many gay and lesbian people have had heterosexual experiences” (p. 3).

There is a gender belief system, which is “a set of beliefs and opinions about males and females and about the purported qualities of masculinity and femininity” (Whitley, p. 692). Terms such as unnatural and immoral are often referenced for the “lifestyle” of queer people. Black Christians’ understanding of homosexuality as immoral often makes it hard for them to see the discrimination against gays as unjust (Griffin, p. 17). The term “faggot” has become one of the most controversial terms in relation to gay men. In old

English, the term initially stood for a bundle of sticks (Online Etymology Dictionary). The first known published use of the word faggot or fag to refer to a male homosexual appeared in 1914 in the U.S. “It referred to a homosexual ball where the men were dressed in drag and called them faggots or sissies” (straightdope.com).

It took small effort in labeling heterosexuality as the “good sex.” “Christian churches and organizations are powerful, and they often paint homosexuals as evil, in many ways they depend on homosexuals not only as leaders and members of their church, but also as the evil to their good” (Chávez, 2004, p. 267). Christianity is founded on the basis of good and evil and without sin, Jesus would not be the most significant figure for Christianity. Christians are taught to remove themselves from all facets of evil. In *Their own received them not: African American lesbians and gays in Black churches*, Black churches are said to be the leaders in the oppression of black gays (Griffin, p. 10).

“Homosexuality was first seen as the wicked passion of oversexed individuals” (p. 37). Religious interpretation of scripture is critical for the reasons homosexuality is viewed negatively. There are prejudices against same-sex attraction because of this assumption. The Black community once “thought of homosexuality as a cultural phenomenon of white people, and AIDS as a disease of gay white men” (Lewis, p. 61). Some Christians view God as one who sends misfortunes as punishments (p. 63). The perception that same-sex attraction is a lifestyle choice has cause harm for queer Christians.

“Homosexuality is seen as a behavior based identity, and as a chosen identity, so it does not deserve protection” (Griffin, p. 78). The assumption is that queer people have chosen

to be the outsider, but what sane person would choose to be hated by their own community?

The Spiral of Silence Theory relates to why coming out is hard for queer Blacks brought up in church. Remaining quiet about one's identity causes fear and secrecy. "Public opinion can be described as the dominating opinion which compels compliance of attitude and behavior in that it threatens the dissenting individual with isolation" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 44). The need to stay silent about being queer can cause self-digest and resentment towards others. The reality of homophobia has an influence on how and when queer individuals come out and share their identities with others. Queer Christians are the minority in this case. They are likely to experience loss in confidence to express their views because of feeling alone or unsupported. Silence is a form of oppression that inhibits individuals from living fully and happily.

### **History of the LGBT Christian Movement**

Christian marriage is seen as the symbol or sacrament of the loving union between Christ and the church (Lawler, 1991, p. 722). "While American marriage is often described as a secular institution, its deep roots in English ecclesiastical marriage reveal its religious nature" (Knouse, p. 378). Religion motivates the American understanding of marriage as not only a sexual union, but a heterosexual union, most often characterized by non-consanguineous, monogamous, consensual, adult intercourse (p. 379).

The gay Christian movement was formed for religious inclusion and equality. Numerous Christian congregations throughout the United States have issued formal statements of inclusion and affirmation for their queer members (O'Brien, p. 194). The

increasing visibility of queer members in Christian religions may also reflect a general climate of religious individualism. Many coming out stories involve a process of renouncing religious roots. These stories can be interpreted as a statement of renunciation and opposition against a system of meaning in which lesbians and gays find no place for themselves. “Lesbian and gay Christians can be seen as playing out a variation on an old theme: the contradiction of spirituality and sexuality is their particular struggle; the manner in which they engage the struggle defines their character” (p. 188). A point of reconciliation with one’s homosexuality and Christianity seems to be the acknowledgement that God created me, and He must have created me this way for a reason, becoming a turning point for queer Christians.

Queer black Christians may have sat in the pews on Sunday mornings, listening to the pastor express how their lives and relationships are shameful, flawed, sinful and immoral, and some have remained there, in order to maintain a relationship with God. There is a need for community for queer people of all backgrounds because many are likely to deal with some kind of suffering, either in their families or religious communities. “Queer individuals experience pain from being disowned by their family members, from lies about themselves, from losing their jobs within and outside the U.S. military, from housing discrimination, assault, ridicule, violence, and death just because they are gay, it is not true that gays do not understand suffering” (Griffin, p. 88). Same-sex couples often find acceptance only within the LGBT community, rely on community organizations for specialized resources, or negotiate their separateness from the community due to the pressures of heterosexism (Lannutti, 2005, p. 6). “Articulating a queer Christian identity

involves transforming a discourse of shame and silence. For lesbian and gay Christians, pride is based on a belief that homosexuality has a place in God's plan" (p. 194).

### **Advancements in the Church: Affirmation Ministries**

It is crucial to note that advancements in the church have been made. Affirming churches are being established and congregations are seeing the importance of inclusivity for queer individuals. "Homosexuality carries a heavy stigma within Christianity, placing lesbians, gays, and bisexuals on lesser ground than their straight counterparts" (McQueeney, 2009, p. 152). An "Opening and Affirming" (ONA) church is one that has publicly declared that queer people are welcome in its full circle ministry (Chaney, 2011, p. 203). By recognizing same-sex relationships, church members have been redefining heterosexual monogamy and making a symbolic claim for marriage to include same-sex couples. "Some denominations of Christianity, including The United Church of Christ, The Metropolitan Community Church, Unity Fellowship, and many other independent churches that identify as a variety of denominations, ranging from Methodist and Presbyterian to Lutheran and even Baptist, openly accept even embrace gays and lesbians as members and clergy" (p. 204). In these churches, many lesbians and gay men found new families that accepted them, bringing them back into God's universal family.

With this belonging they felt healed of the suffering and rejection that had burdened them. These church members created new possibilities for a Christian way of life in which homosexuality was seen as natural, normal, and potentially moral (McQueeney, p. 169). "Faith-based constructions of homosexuality and LGBT rights are gaining popularity as a way to reclaim "moral values" from the conservative right" (p. 170). The

ideals for inclusivity could not be accomplished without including and affirming all people in the community. Churches have promoted standards like this while also choosing what was acceptable. The inclusive ideal made it difficult for church leaders to enforce the Christian morals and standards they valued without being seen as hypocritical. “By definition, a religious organization accepts all members; however, principally, both gay-affirming and open-affirming churches are not discriminatory in their practices” (Chaney, p. 203). The church is heading in the right direction, but advancements are still needed in terms of full acceptance within all Black Christian denominations.



## **Methods**

The main goal for this thesis is to focus on real people and their real experience with church and community. With advice from my thesis advisors I honed the focus to ten people, five women and five men. I formulated 16 questions for the interview with the desire to question the participants' relationship with the Black Church, friends, and family. I also wanted to learn about their levels of comfortability with themselves especially in terms of sexuality and spirituality. Black people are used to facing many obstacles on a daily basis, so I aimed to create a conversational atmosphere that focuses on specific obstacles in which religion and sexuality were the main focus. The questions asked are as follows:

1. What kind of religious background (denomination) were you raised in?
2. What role did church play in your upbringing?
3. How is your personal relationship with the Black Church?
4. How was sex discussed in your family?
5. How long have you known about your sexual identity?
6. What were your thoughts at that moment?
7. Do you see coming out as important? Why or why not?
8. How accepting are your family and close friends?
9. Do you have any queer relatives?
10. What was your biggest fear in terms of sexuality and spirituality?
11. Who was the first family member or you told? How was the conversation?
12. How has your sexuality enhanced your spirituality or closeness to God?

13. Who has been your greatest supporter?
14. Who has been your greatest non-supporter?
15. How comfortable are you with your sexual identity?
16. If you attend church on a regular basis, is it important for you to attend an affirming church? Why or why not?

### **Participants**

The ten men and women who agreed to these interviews were from close relationships. All participants were African American, with five men and five women being interviewed on their experiences with sexuality and religion. The age range for women was 23-29. The age range for men was 19-37. Each participant is named in the following section. The women's responses will be first and the responses from the men will follow.

### **Evaluations**

Based on the interviews I conducted, women and men vary in five key categories. Each male reported that sex was never discussed by their parents. They also knew about their sexuality at very young ages. The view on coming out to friends and family was a crucial part of each male's journey. All of the men had more queer relatives, compared to the two women who do. The levels of comfortability with their sexuality for men are higher than the women I studied. Four of the five women had better relationships with the Black Church and desired to attend an affirming church in the future.

Although the women learned of their sexuality identity later in life, there was consistency with going to church and joining an affirming church. The five men were

more upfront about hurt from the Black Church because of how Black gay men have been perceived. The women have had more conversations about sex with their parents than the men. Parents of young girls seemed more fearful of their daughter having sex, but the conversation was crucial. Their mothers were also more likely to share with their daughters about the reality of sex and its consequences.

The participants either grew up Baptist or COGIC. Both genders experienced hard conversations and encounters with family and close friends after coming out. Each person had challenges to overcome in regards to their sexuality. Being Black and queer may have caused one to code-switch or hide their sexual identity especially in religious settings. A few participants admitted to not going to church or viewing church as a huge part of one's spirituality. This outlook displays another perspective of how religion and sexuality intersect. The relation to religion and sexuality also connected to the community and religious denominations of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

There are 91 queer affirming churches in Los Angeles and 44 affirming denominations according to [gaychurch.org](http://gaychurch.org). This site was designed to assist queer Christians with resources like finding a church, marriage equality, access to literature, and access to arguments concerning homosexuality in the Bible. The affirming denominations that directly support Black communities include Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), Unity Fellowship, and the United Progressive Pentecostal Church (UPPC). According to the Human Rights Campaign, "the National Baptist Convention has not released a formal statement encouraging its

constituent churches to be welcoming and inclusive of LGBTQ congregants, but does allow full autonomy to its member churches to embrace that goal.”

The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB) has become the national voice for queer Baptist Christians. Since 1993, AWAB has been supporting churches in being and becoming Welcoming and Affirming of all people regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. This denomination is focused on ending sexual discrimination in the church and community through providing educational resources on human sexuality. The closest church to the Los Angeles area is in Costa Mesa. Reverend Dr. Sarah Halverson-Cano was the Senior Pastor at Fairview Community Church. She shared that queer Christians are allowed to be ordained and married at her church. The queer community has the ability to serve and be served at Fairview. “We were active in the fight against Proposition 8 and have been equal marriage advocates. We are a proud open, welcoming and affirming church and believe that it is important to take this stance to ensure LGBT people feel welcome,” she stated.

Metropolitan Community Church recognizes a state of need around the world in the areas of human rights and justice including but not limited to the LGBTQ community. Founded in 1968, Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) has been at the vanguard of civil and human rights movements by addressing issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, economics, climate change, aging, and global human rights. MCC is the largest international organization for public education about homosexuality and Christianity. Founders MCC has a focus on inclusion, community, spiritual transformation, and social action. This church is located in South Central Los Angeles

and preaches relevant, vibrant and scripture-based messages that embodies and celebrates everyone's spirituality and sexuality.

The Unity Fellowship Church is not an oppressive space for LGBTQ Christians. Unity teaches that all people are created with sacred worth and that no one exists outside the heart of God. Its basic principles state that God is good, and because all people exist within God, they also are inherently good. Unity Fellowship of Christ Church in Los Angeles has a firm stance that "God is Love and Love is for Everyone." Unity Fellowship Church was founded in 1982 by Rev. Carl Bean for primarily openly Gay and Lesbian African Americans. Archbishop Carl Bean was an openly gay preacher and gospel singer. The church allows same-sex couples to be married. Unity Fellowship believes in the Bible and all great spiritual writings or guides must be read taking into consideration the time of their writing, and examining different interpretations is necessary.

The Renewed Church of Los Angeles is an affiliate of the United Progressive Pentecostal Church in South Central with a focus to love all people regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or social status. Led by an openly gay pastor, Curt D. Thomas formed the church after being terminated for his sexuality. As the Senior Pastor and Founder, he encouraged his congregation to live their authentic truth while praising and thanking God. Pastor Thomas began Renewed LA in a coffee shop for bible study filled with queer Black Christians. This church has thrived on the mission of not rejecting, isolating or judging its guests and members. Renewed LA became an institution known for its exceptional worship and welcoming atmosphere.

## **Results**

Lukenia Jones was raised Baptist and church played a large role in her upbringing. “I have been in church my entire life and I have always been an active participant in several ministries and activities,” she said. Her relationship with the Black Church started at birth and was all she knew, spiritually. Sex wasn't really discussed in her family. It was assumed that she knew to wait to have sex until marriage, and to do it with a person of the opposite sex. She knew about her sexuality since she was 10 or 11 and didn't read too much into it. Jones saw coming out as important as she gets older; she would like to be honest with herself. Her family pretended to be accepting, but saw this is a phase, and her close friends admitted to being okay with her sexuality.

Her biggest fear concerned herself and her ministry. Jones shared, “I'm worried that people will look more at me and not focus on the God in me. Ultimately causing me to not accomplish what I believe God had called me to do.” The first family member she came out to was her sister, which was very awkward. She didn't take Jones seriously and still doesn't. She was determined to push through the negativity that surrounded her in order to fulfill her ministry. Her greatest support came from her cousin, who truly accepted her. But her mom and my aunt were not supportive, “they condemn me and trying to make me feel bad,” she shared. Jones admitted to being comfortable around people she doesn't know. The worry involves people from church or in her family being very quick to pass judgment, therefore it was not discussed. The church she belonged to was not affirming, but her mind was open to a new place of worship in the future.

Zhane Gay was raised Baptist when her mother started attending a Black church and she felt comfortable there. Conversations about sex were seldom growing up in her family. Gay identified herself as queer. “My girlfriend and I have been together for a year now and since being with her I don't consider myself a lesbian and I am very much so still intrigued by men,” she said. She was excited to tell her mother because she only cared about her immediate family and close friends opinion. Her dad actually said he knew about her sexual preference, which she found ridiculous because she didn't even know she liked girls at the time. Gay also had a queer older cousin.

Her biggest and honest fear around sexuality and spirituality was being denied in the afterlife or loving someone with all her heart, something pure but considered a sin. The first family member she told was her mom, who became her greatest supporter. She shared that her “relationship and love for Riana has helped me tap into my spirituality from the perspective that this journey has allowed me to feel something so amazing.” Her brother was supportive, and had mentioned that he believed her sexuality was some kind of phase. Gay confessed to being quite comfortable with her queer identity. “As a Black woman, I feel like I already live outside this box that people try so hard to fit in so being in love with a women isn't bothersome,” she said. In the near future, Gay planned to attend an affirming church.

Mariah Miller was raised Baptist and church played and played a big part in her life. Her father had been a preacher since her early childhood. “I grew up in the church so really it's all I know,” she shared. She had a good relationship with the Black Church because she had never felt like they did her any wrong. Sex was never discussed in her

family. During her senior year of high school was when she learned of her sexual identity, “I didn’t know what was going on and I didn’t know if something was wrong with me or if it was just a phase,” she declared. Coming out was important but not a priority for Miller. She felt like “those around you should know the real you. But at the same time I feel that everyone should be able to just live their life.”

Her friends and family accepted her as a person but accepting her sexuality orientation would take longer, despite the fact that she had queer cousins. Miller’s biggest fear was feeling like she committed the worst sin imaginable. The first person she told was one of her friends from high school. “He is gay so I felt like he would be the easiest, which he was. He was very supportive and just encouraged me to live life to the fullest,” she said. She felt like her sexuality brought her closer to God as she found herself praying more often. Major support came from her friend, Carmyne and girlfriend, Kenia. Some of her friends did not support her sexuality. When she first told them, they took it as a joke and she believed they always would, but she became more comfortable with accepting herself. “Despite how long I knew about my sexual identity, I found myself fighting it, but now I just don’t care. Why hide who you are?” she asked. Attending an affirming church would be the end goal for Miller, seeking to feel more comfortable on Sundays.

Ashely Hill attended a Christian elementary and junior high school that she loved. She grew up on Christian beliefs but did not attend church on a regular basis. “Because I went to a Christian school, the importance of religion and faith has been instilled in me since a young age,” she said. She did have a strong relationship with the Black Church. Her family never discussed sex. “My mom just always told me that I better not have a



boyfriend all throughout high school,” she shared. She first learned of her sexuality during her sophomore year in high school but because of the negative stigmas and non-acceptance, she ignored it. Hill thought she could not be gay because of the negative stereotypes.

Hill did not believe that coming out was important. “I feel like finding out who you are, is important and we should be able to live in a society where coming out is not important,” she said. Her family was not comfortable with her sexual identity. Some accepted her, while others ignored the information altogether. She had queer relatives on her dad’s side of the family. Hill’s biggest fear was not being accepted, being judged, or treated differently. She first told her bisexual cousin, who was awaiting the conversation. Her sexuality enhanced her spirituality; as she continued growing and maturing, her faith grew as well. Her friends were her support system, along with some of her family. Her level of comfort is quite high and she saw the importance of attending a church that accepts all of God’s children.

Christiana Cobb was raised in a non-denominational background and was Baptist until the age of seven. Her relationship with the Black church stemmed from her upbringing, “I grew up with a deep love for my church. It’s the foundation for our people,” she said. Sex was brought up by her mother at a very young age. “I knew I wasn’t allowed to have sex before marriage even though my parents weren’t ever married. Once I was no longer a virgin, my mom never looked at me the same,” she admitted. Cobb did not know of her sexual identity until she was 23. She found women attractive in a lustful way but not romantic. She began having questions after being with

her partner and identified as bisexual. “My thought at that moment was confused, anxious, scared, and angry with myself because it didn’t make sense yet,” she said.

Coming out was important for her because her feelings for the same sex were serious, so she shared that with others. Her close friends were very accepting, but some were trying to fully understand. Her dad was totally accepting but her mom did not agree and thinks this is a phase. Her biggest fear was that “people in the church who know me and spoken words over me would think that those words were invalid.” The first family member she told was her dad, and it was a good conversation.

Cobb desired to learn about herself which allowed her to know more about God and received a bigger view of God because of her sexuality. “I see Him as complex spirit now which is helpful,” she admitted. Her partner was her biggest supporter. They went through journey together and she always had her partner if she lost anyone else. She became more comfortable with her sexuality, but only outside of church spaces. She enjoyed the idea of an affirming church, although she did not attend one. Her goal is join one in the near future.

Kenneth Brown was raised non-denominational and COGIC. Church played a pivotal role in his life, “It was a defined moral compass and I have used this theology to connect to the world,” he said. He had a love-hate relationship with the Black Church and felt church was experiencing Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder. Brown witnessed the Black Church becoming a comparative and controlling system. “Leadership will make members feel like they aren’t doing enough physical work in the church,” he admitted. In terms of his childhood, sex was never discussed by his parents. His godmother was the first person

to tell him and his siblings about sex. He also shared that learning about sex came from conversations with friends.

He was aware of his sexuality since birth. He fully grasped the “born this way” ideology and recalled being attracted to his best friend at a very young age. His initial thoughts were that it was great and normal. Those feelings changed when he went to church and learned that his identity was perceived as sinful. “I always have to code-switch in church settings,” he said. He saw coming out as important and although his family was not fully accepting, his brother and close friends never had a problem with his sexuality. He first came out to his cousin, a gay male and the conversation went well as they became closer. His cousin became a therapeutic figure in his life.

Brown was always comfortable with his sexuality and stated, “The goal is to not allow fear to rule and run my life. I have to deal with the things I’m afraid of every day.” He attended a non-affirming church in Hollywood because it did not attack queer people. He would consider attending an affirming church, but only if it resembled the foundations he valued most.

Juston Jordan was raised in a Baptist church which played a huge role in his social life. “I was raised in the church, I have plenty of longtime friends and family who fellowshiped in church with me and I actually found my life calling in the church,” he said. He noticed many things wrong with church. He believed there are plenty of insecurities that have been drilled into our heads causing fear of challenging scripture or God. Jordan and his parents knew of his sexuality during his childhood. He was very flamboyant with a high trilling voice. His thoughts about his sexuality were full of worry

in terms of how people would react once they knew. “It sucks that children have to think about these things at such a very young age,” he shared. He also viewed coming out as a very important part of a gay person’s life.

Jordan felt that not being honest would be a mentally unstable way of living. Most of his family did not know about his sexuality but his plan was to inform them all. His parents and friends were very accepting, although it was a tough conversation for his parents. “After being forced out of the closet I had a breakdown in front of them, I thought my life was going to end, but they knew all along,” he admitted. The biggest fear he had stemmed from not getting God’s acceptance. He first came out to both parents and after the discussion, their relationship grew stronger. His sexuality brought him closer to God, who became his greatest support. Jordan was comfortable with his sexuality and did not view affirming churches as important. “It’s not important to me and I believe that I don’t even have to enter a church to keep my faith,” he declared.

Carlton Cummings was raised Baptist but no longer attends church. “Church was, in my mind, something that I had to do,” he admitted. He had no relationship with the Black Church although his friends and family attended on a regular basis. His parents did not talk about sex and when he learned of his sexual identity at 11, he felt unclean and said nothing for four more years. Cummings had a few queer relatives that remain closeted. “It requires a level of introspection that most people refuse to engage, but it allows for a form of freedom that is never given, and only taken,” he said. His family and friends were fully accepting and supportive. His main fear was that he would not be seen as a good person because his sexuality and spirituality will be consumed by darkness.

He first told his mother about his sexuality and learned that his godmother had already told her, and they became his greatest supporters. His sexuality caused him to look beyond religion and focus on spirituality. “It caused me to distance myself from the church, which opens my eyes to the God in everything,” he shared. Cummings was always comfortable with his sexuality and although he did not attend church, he fully understood the importance of organized religion.

Edward Clark was raised Baptist and church was his entire social life. He recalled that “my dad was a pastor while I was growing up so we were very involved in church.” His relationship with the Black Church was in need of a change. He questioned the church’s teachings in terms of homosexuality and sin, which caused him to flee from church. His parents did not talk about sex, but he knew it was something he could not do. “I would learn about sex in school and come home ready to talk to my parents about it and they would shut the conversation down,” he admitted. He knew about his sexuality since the 7th grade but did not act on it for two more years. At that moment he felt ashamed because he knew it was forbidden.

Clark saw coming out as important since the Bible highlighted that truth shall set you free. His parents did not agree with his sexuality, but his brothers always supported him. He first told his older brother in 9th grade and the conversation did not go well because his brother couldn’t understand his sexuality. Luckily, his friends stepped in and supported his sexuality and spirituality. He had a queer cousin on his mom’s side and two queer cousins on his dad’s side of the family, so he knew he was not alone. The major fear he had was whether he would end up alone as a result of suppressing his sexual

identity. Since Clark's parents were not supportive, he was never been able to be his true self around them. In regards to being comfortable with his sexuality, it would be a work in progress. "I would want to say I'm fully comfortable but I'm not. At church people assume I have a girlfriend and I never correct those heterosexual comments," he said. He would enjoy attending an affirming church one day because it would be a space where he could worship without being a target.

Malcom Kidd was raised Baptist and grew up with the strict rules that the denomination values. Church was a very big part of his life and he went to church every day. He admitted to being the "poster child of everything at church." His relationship with the Black Church meant ongoing attendance and sharing his different standards with leaders. Kidd valued his love of church and spiritual closeness to God. Sex was rarely discussed, but his father would bring up sex often although his mother found it to be taboo. He admitted to always knowing about his sexuality. "When I really start thinking about it, I was like seven or eight," he stated. His initial thought at that moment revolved around realizing that he found young men attractive.

For Kidd, coming out was definitely important. "It is your point; it is your time to really let the world know who you are," he said. His opinion was that being queer is such a struggle and builds character so it is necessary to decide when to come out. Some of his family was not accepting of his sexuality. Their reaction was "I guess we have to accept it." He had many cousins who were warm and understanding though. In terms of queer relatives, he had two lesbian cousins. Kidd's biggest fear was being shunned by the entire

church. His first familial conversation was with his first cousin. “We just laughed and she even told me about her sexual identity that day,” he said.

His sexuality and spirituality made him closer to God. He shared that in this lifestyle he felt alone a lot. Kidd’s niece, two years younger than him, was greatest supporter and he stated that “she always makes me feel comfortable.” He was proud but still was faced with insecurities in terms of his sexuality. Attending an affirming church is a outlying thought because he became used to the traditional style of church.

## **Discussion**

The taboo around sex has caused the participants to acknowledge the hurt and triumph that emanates from coming out. While the need to join an affirming church is not the most important factor to all of them, the reason could be due to the lack of affirming churches in their areas. June 26, 2015 changed the fate of the queer community through the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States. This validation would lead to multiple marriages throughout the country, through the court system and affirming churches.

Los Angeles is full of religious spaces for the traditional Black Christian. It is important to note that Baptist churches evolved in the South and are founded in southern mentality. “A Baptist understanding of the church as the present reign of Christ would mean that local congregations should anticipate the Kingdom in three ways: composition, proclamation, and transformation” (Moore & Sagers, 2008, p. 76). The COGIC church is the largest Pentecostal church and largest predominantly African American denomination in the United States (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 508). This denomination does not accept homosexuality as normal or accept it as a way for a Christian to live (Ware, 2001, p. 7).

Based on the interviews, code-switching is a common experience when attending church. This causes queer individuals to portray a heterosexual lifestyle through clothing and behavior. The Black church continues to hold the allegiance of large numbers of African Americans and exercises great influence over their behavior (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991, p. 428). There is recognition that relationships, sex, and dating can touch places of fear, shame, and regret. But it can also be an arena full of questions, curiosity,



and desire for exploration. The lack of resources concerning sexuality puts young adults and teens at a disadvantage. The person struggling with their sexuality is purposefully left out, which causes queer individuals to stray from church altogether.

A study by the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that black gay and bisexual Americans are not only more religious than their white counterparts but also quite possibly more religious than Americans as a whole (Moodie-Mills & Miller, 2012, para.4). The link between silence and being non-affirming has intermingled in many Black churches. Queer Christians are most likely attending non-affirming churches because of their childhood upbringing and their commitment as adults betrays a bind where they are weighing the spiritual, social, and psychological costs of abandoning versus maintaining these religious affiliations (Barnes & Meyer, 2012, p. 513).

Jennifer Goto was the pastor at St. Paul's United Methodist in San José. St. Paul's is an affirming church and promotes being a safe space for queer Christians in the area. It wasn't until late in high school that she realized some churches excluded people and my family's congregation began to make visible statements of inclusion. She witnessed LGBTQ people receive the Holy Spirit and God's favor just as she has. "If God is saying yes, who am I to say no?" she said. She believed that her role as an ally is to sit in the agonizing places where people disagree with her but are not attacking her personally.

Pastor Jennifer knew many people whose hearts have been changed by witnessing the love shared by a same-sex couple and realizing it isn't that different from their own relationships. One of the hardest parts about pastoring an affirming church is that people

assume all churches are hateful and exclude other. She often encouraged people to look at the broader Church to find a more affirming community to be part of. “I do advise that while they are being so brave that they also find a place to be safe and prayed over and loved simply for who they are,” she stated.

The necessity for affirming churches around the country should be recognized. Many queer Christians have formed churches aimed to welcome those who have been judged and turned away from traditional institutions. The Black community, known for being homophobic, has pushed LGBT members away and affirming churches have stepped in to create inclusion and acceptance. Queer Christians with desires to marry their partners can rely on an affirming pastor to provide counsel and officiation. There is also a need for affirming pastors to grasp the emotional pain caused by traditional religion and supply techniques to manage that distress. Queer Black Christians have various experiences, but the desire worship God in a comforting and spiritual space is a common goal.

Sample size was the first limitation I was faced with. I chose to interview ten people, five women and five men in order to learn about their personal experiences with sexuality and religion. I believe the information I gathered from them was substantial evidence that supports the claim that predominantly Black religion is not affirming or welcoming for queer Christians. Yet, as I focused on the scope on the participants, the findings would have stood out more if the sample size was doubled. If I had more dialogue with Black queer Christians, then I would have received more insight on different experiences from denominations rather than just Baptist and COGIC.

Lack of reliable data was the second limitation for this thesis. The lack of reliable data regarding Black LGBTQ churches was difficult to find. There is are not many religious spaces for the group I studied. I had to limit the scope of the analysis, which became a significant obstacle in finding trends and a meaningful relationship between Los Angeles County and the queer religious community. I had a difficult time narrowing the focus on the city but it shows that queer Black people are more likely to attend a church that does not cater to their religious upbringing. Access was the last limitation I was faced with doing this thesis. If I could do this study again, I would network more in order to gain different perspectives from those who found spirituality later in life.

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